

MOHAM-SHIITES

THE SOUTHERN SUBURBS

How Militant Is the "Poverty Belt" Around Beirut?

The southern suburbs of Beirut have for years been making headlines in the local press, but in the past few weeks they captured the attention of the international media following the twin suicide attacks on the U.S. marines and French troops of the Multinational peace-keeping force on Oct. 23. Because of their proximity to the U.S. marine base in the Beirut Airport area and the generally anti-American stance of the predominantly Moslem Shiite population, the southern suburbs have been linked with the disaster which left nearly 300 MNF troops dead. Local leaders have denied any involvement, direct or indirect, in the tragedy, but reports of an imminent reprisal action have kept hundreds of thousands of the local inhabitants in constant fear and anxiety. Although part of the Greater Beirut area, the southern suburbs appear to constitute a distinct political and military case in view of the prevailing political attitudes of the leaders and the recurrent clashes between the local militia on the one hand and the Lebanese army and rightist Lebanese Forces militia on the other.

Population. Even before the Lebanese strife of the mid-seventies, the southern suburbs of Beirut had posed a sharp contrast in its poverty and low standards of living compared with the striking affluence of the capital proper. Consequently, the southern suburbs had been variously called "the belt of poverty" or the "suburbs of the deprived." They constituted the motivating factor behind the "Movement of the Deprived" which was launched in the early 1970s by Imam Mousa Al Sadr, spiritual leader of the Moslem Shiite community who has been missing since 1978 after a visit to Libya.

Basically, the southern suburbs make up an area of about 28 sq. kilometers and include the following: Burj Brajneh, Hay As-Sullom, Amrousiyeh, Mraijeh, Lailaki, Shweifat Desert, Sfair, Hay Madi, Bir Al Abed, Haret Hraik, Ghobairah, Chiyah and Guzal, all surrounding the Lebanese capital from the south. The original population of the area is estimated at around 150,000, but this has risen since the turn of the century to around 700,000, according to a survey published in the weekly magazine of Beirut's leading daily AN NAHAR this week. Although the predominant population is Shiite, there have been smaller Moslem Sunni and Christian communities living there.

MOHAM-SHIITES, Cont'd.

The dramatic increase in population has been caused by a variety of factors, but three can be singled out:

1- **Emigration:** Since Beirut was the hub of business and commerce as well as the throbbing heart of the Lebanese economy, many Lebanese had left their agricultural areas in the south and the east and moved to the capital in search of job opportunities. This was later enhanced by the rise of industrial factories and plants in and around Beirut, which also required increasing numbers of workers.

2- **Israeli Attacks:** From the beginning of the 1970s and until the Israeli invasion of 1982, many Lebanese, particularly Moslem Shiites, were forced to abandon their homes in the south as a result of Palestinian guerrilla attacks on Israel, which most often invited severe military reprisals.

3- **Civil War:** But the biggest influx of Moslem Shiites into the southern suburbs occurred during the two-year civil war of 1975-76, when large numbers of this community were forced out of their homes in what later became known as Christian-controlled areas of east Beirut. Moslem Shiite leaders, quoted by AN NAHAR's weekly, said thousands of Shiites had to leave such areas as Burj Hammoud, Dikwaneh, Nabaa, Sibhay, Hay Ghazwaneh and others and sought refuge in the southern suburbs.

Many also left their homes in Sin El Fil, Karantina and Betchay as well as Tal Zaatar, which had been mainly a Palestinian refugee camp that fell to Christian rightist hands in August, 1976.

Most of the southern suburbs extend into each other, leaving no room for a demarcation line to be drawn between them. This why the powers of the local municipalities often overlap, and the local social organizations are so numerous. AN NAHAR's magazine says there are 17 social clubs in the southern suburbs in addition to 13 boy scout organizations, eight movie theaters (all closed), 15 pharmacies, 50 medical clinics, 100 butchery shops, 600 garages and 62 hair-dressing shops.

As a result of the recent clashes in the summer of this year, many of the local residents have left their homes in the southern suburbs, the magazine said, and estimated the current population at no more than 250,000. It said Hay Madi, Mraijeh and Sfair, for example, are virtually unpopulated, while there is no more than 10 per cent still living in Ruweis.

Features. A tour of the populated areas of the southern suburbs would show an enormous amount of graffiti on the walls as well as dominating posters of the missing Imam Mousa Al Sadr and Iran's religious leader Ayatullah Khomeini. Most of the women wear ankle-long dresses and scarfs around the head with only their faces showing.

Moslem mosques are scattered everywhere and are most crowded on Fridays with bearded armed men and Moslem clerics, a phenomenon that reflects the extent of religious influence in the community.

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Amal Controls. Throughout the southern suburbs the mainstream Shiite militia, Amal, is in control. This happened most distinctly after the outbreak of the so-called "mountain war," which followed Israel's partial withdrawal to the Aqali River on September 4th. The Lebanese army, which entered the southern suburbs and west Beirut on the heels of the Israeli invasion last year, pulled out gradually afterwards and retained a few positions on the fringes of the suburbs.

"When the Lebanese army entered the southern suburbs, we welcomed it," said Hassan Hashem, chairman of the Executive Committee of Amal. The Shiite Mufti, Sheikh Abdel Amir Kabalan, expressed the same view. In the interview with AN NAHAR's magazine, the two Shiite leaders blamed the subsequent conflicts on the rightist Lebanese Forces militia which was hard on the heels of the Lebanese army.

The two men cited a number of incidents in which the Lebanese army appeared to be conniving with the Lebanese Forces, until Sept. 23, when the rightist militia reportedly attempted to bring down pictures of Imam Mousa Sadr at Mraijeh in order to put up pictures of the late President-elect Bachir Gemayel. Four Shiites were allegedly killed in that incident, which led to the major September unrest during which Shiite and Amal militiamen swarmed the streets of west Beirut.

But before the militia could consolidate its grip on the predominantly Moslem sector of the capital, the Lebanese army staged a major sweep and flushed the militiamen out, restoring army control of west Beirut. However, the army refrained from storming the southern suburbs mainly to avoid what could have turned out to be a bloodbath. Since then, Amal has been in control of the southern suburbs.

No Foreigners. "Apart from the Palestinian refugee camps, there are no foreigners or non-Lebanese in the southern suburbs," said Sheikh Kabalan and Mr. Hashem. "There is no truth in allegations that the southern suburbs have become a hideout for terrorists," Hashem said. The two men said that while Amal is in full control of security, law and order, "anyone of the local inhabitants is free to have his own political beliefs."

They both agreed, however, that "fear and anxiety" are the dominating factors which are reflected in "sniping and counter-sniping, armed barricades, sand-barriers, road-blocks, clashes and indiscriminate shelling all of which have forced many people to leave their homes for safer areas. Those who remain live in constant fear, anxiety and anticipation."

On the frontlines, Amal's fighters almost invariably accused the rightist Lebanese Forces of violating the ceasefire by either sniping or kidnapping people. "Every time we return fire, the Lebanese army intervenes by shelling our positions," the fighters told AN NAHAR's magazine. "Then, the official Radio Station claims that foreigners have been attacking Lebanese army positions."

LEBANON-SHIITES, Cont'd.

(Akef Haydar) F/DLE In an interview with the same magazine, Mr. Akef Haider, head of Amal's Politburo, also denied there were any non-Lebanese in the southern suburbs. "Media allegations to the contrary are a cause of anxiety and concern, perhaps intended to create conditions conducive for a blow against the area by local or foreign quarters," Haider said. "But we warn against any foolish adventure," he declared.

Haider denied Amal had a body in charge of military decisions and another in charge of political ones. "There are political decisions that are carried out by military people," he said, noting that this is what makes Amal different from all other "active forces" on the Lebanese scene. While emphasizing that Amal is exclusively responsible for security in the southern suburbs, he conceded that "some violations and excesses" could happen, "as they do in other countries or even in the areas under Lebanese legitimate control." Amal always acts to curb such excesses, he said.

"I would like to make it clear that we do not wish, by virtue of our military strength, to impose our views on anyone," Haider said. "Our military strength became necessary after the Israeli invasion and the adventurous practices of the (rightist) militias against our people and land as well as after we had been forced out at gunpoint from Nabaa, Sabra, Ta' Zahr and other areas."

The carrying of arms by the Shiites, he said, was intended to "defend the land against the Israeli enemy and to defend our human integrity." Amal's conformity with other Lebanese political forces, such as the Progressive Socialist Party of Mr. Walid Jumlat and the National Salvation Front "is within the context of our understanding of the general political situation. It is a democratic opposition to prevent the Administration from making unilateral decisions on the destiny of Lebanon without our participation."

Although Amal is overwhelmingly a Shiite organization, "It is definitely not our aim to achieve sectarian goals, but rather comprehensive social reforms," Haider said.

(Sheikh Fadlallah) F/DLE AN NAHAR also interviewed Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a prominent Shiite cleric with considerable influence in the southern suburbs. He shared Haider's views and said, "Unlike others, we do not demand guarantees (for the Shiite community) but rather equality and justice."

Sheikh Fadlallah, too, blamed the Christian rightists for the eviction of thousands of Shiites from east Beirut suburbs. "Many were killed without even knowing one letter of politics," he said. That was when Shiite refugees moved to the southern suburbs and carried weapons, he added. "This does not make the southern suburbs different from east Beirut, except that anyone can enter the southern suburbs and leave safely, but in east Beirut I'm not sure."

(AN NAHAR's magazine printed a note saying that the rightist Lebanese Forces refused to give their views in the survey.)